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AUTHOR	Power, Kerith; Roberts, Dianne
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ABSTRACT

Contact zones are social spaces where different cultures meet, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination. The field of early childhood education is one such contact zone. This paper discusses how one Aboriginal principal of an Aboriginal preschool and primary school in Australia, has to deal with various constructions from the dominant culture concerning children, families, and the care-giving and educational roles of women, as well as the power relations of racial politics. This principal walks in and out of the mainstream in ways that give the school principal the maximum power. One option is to avoid the common Aboriginal attitude of "They're up there and we're down here," and concentrate on what skills are needed to function. For example, the principal can code-switch between standard English and Aboriginal English depending on the environment he or she is in. This strategy goes beyond language to a concept known as double vision, where an individual takes from the dominant culture things that open doors, yet still feels comfortable with oneself. Parallel situations were observed in the Wahkowotin (Good Relations) Schools cluster in Alberta, where Canada Natives were given the opportunity to design a school. Nevertheless, although a Cree language and culture associate teacher was present in each classroom with the certified teacher, there was not one Canadian Aboriginal person were not in charge. The paper concludes that the power imbalance of colonial times continues today, but some Indigenous leaders manage to exert positive power. (Contains 13 references.) (TD)

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Early Childhood Education as a contact zone- emergent Indigenous leadership in Australia and Canada.

Kerith Power and Dianne Roberts.

This paper was presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Sydney 2000.

ABSTRACT: In a conversation about the concept of cross- cultural contact zones (Pratt, 1992) between an Indigenous Principal and an academic, this concept is applied to anecdotes of early childhood, strategies of developing as an Indigenous educational leader the skills for children and staff to operate in different cultural environments , and some of the similarities and differences in leadership issues in Indigenous-controlled educational environments in Australia and Canada. Some educational leaders , by adopting a 'doubled vision' of Indigenous identity (de Lauretis, 1987) avoid the fixedness of identity politics and are able to exert agency in 'ongoing colonial times' (Nakata, 1998).

DIANNE

Kerith and myself are going to make a joint presentation today on Early Childhood Education as a contact zone- emergent Indigenous leadership in Australia and Canada.

We are going to present this talk as a conversation between us. We have been having these conversations for four years now. I am the Principal and Director of Minimbah Aboriginal Preschool and Primary School in Armidale.

KERITH

Hullo. I'm one of the 'Friends of Minimbah', a group of non-Aboriginal educators Dianne uses as 'jouncing boards' in her work of developing Minimbah into a first class school for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children in our community.

DIANNE:

The talk will be in three sections. First I'm going to tell a yarn about my schooling to tell you what came into my mind when Kerith introduced me to the term 'contact zone'. Then Kerith is going to talk about some theory about cross-cultural contact zones.

Second I'll talk about the way I work in early childhood education as a contact zone and how I see we can develop skills for Aboriginal children and staff to operate in different cultural environments. Kerith will add a theoretical perspective to this section from some writing about opening up the early childhood field to multiple voices and diverse knowledge.

Last, we'll talk about a study trip we took to Canada where we looked at Indigenous educational leadership with friends I had met on my last trip to North America. The Wildcat family are educational leaders at a reserve in Hobbema, Alberta, Canada. Kerith also introduced me to academics and teachers she had met via the World Wide Web at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan , Canada.

Hopefully we'll leave about ten minutes at the end for questions.

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THE CONCEPT OF A 'CONTACT ZONE'.

DIANNE:

When Kerith first used this expression to me I thought about my own schooling. I've told the story about my own educational journey as a keynote speaker at last year's conference. A lot of it was negative but I loved reading. One positive experience I had was nicking books from the school library (because Aboriginal children were not allowed to borrow books(?) and reading them on the long bus ride home from school. I read books like Enid Blyton and the classics like Robinson Crusoe. People have approached me after talks I have given and asked me why I read those books. In those days there were no culturally relevant books for Aboriginal children so those were the only books I could read. But I enjoyed those books. They opened up a different world to me. I was exposed to a world outside the fence that the white hierarchical structure had put up around my grandfather's land at Bellbrook. That was one of the first and only positive experiences I got from the mainstream education structure as a child. I'm trying to make sure that the negative things that happened to me don't ever happen again for the Aboriginal children I care for. As a child I took from the dominant non-Aboriginal culture something that would open doors for me. And I'm still trying to do that today with the Aboriginal children and teachers at Minimbah.

KERITH:

One of the ways of looking at Dianne's story is to use a concept of 'contact zones'. Mary Louise Pratt in her book Imperial Writing and Transculturation (1992:4) describes 'contact zones' as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination'. I think the field of early childhood education is one site where there is a complicated dance between ideas from dominant cultures of education including various constructions of the care-giving and educational roles of women, constructions of children and families. In an Aboriginal controlled early childhood centre the whole mix is complicated again by the power relations of racial politics. I have talked previously about ways Dianne has developed of using her Aboriginality in walking in and out of the mainstream in ways that give her and her school the maximum power in a situation where the power is unequal (Power & Roberts, 1999a : 3).

DIANNE:

The dominant society will always overrule. I wouldn't focus on trying to change attitudes. Anger doesn't go anywhere. What I do is to say to myself or perform in a way that's going to in some ways override that attitudinal belief rather than try to change it. We spend all our energies in making an environment that is more comfortable for us. It often comes up that Aboriginal people say 'They're up there and we're down here'. Now I put that right out of my mind and ask myself in any situation 'What skills do I need?' There isn't a level in society that we think is the right way to switch code to. I often was embarrassed because I spoke Bellbrook English and some Aboriginal people laughed at me. I often found that I was using, and I call that switch coding,
using the language that was important to feel comfortable in the environment in which we're working. But that's me. I learned to do that, I've learned to adjust my thinking, or switch code my thinking in the way that I would act in that environment. What often happens, if your self-esteem is so low from being kicked down because of the way you speak, what you need to do is strengthen that within yourself, you've got to find that inner peace. Many of our children are angry because of structural violence in our society. What we've got to keep focusing on is that 'one t-shirt fits all' philosophy. If a child or an adult fits that t-shirt, good luck to them, they can end up wherever they want to be. But we have to be aware of and keep reflecting on the ways we can adjust that t-shirt. At Minimbah we try to make the environment comfortable for the children to build up their self-esteem. For example, instead of putting a child down for

speaking Aboriginal English we accept how they express things and model standard English. What I believe in this school is to keep exposing the children and the staff to as many different ways of learning or coming together as possible so they become comfortable and have good self-esteem in any environment. Somewhere in a child's or an adult's well-being there's something we have to tap into.

KERITH:

In lots of ways the field of early childhood education has been constructed by and reproduced 'grand narratives' like development and ideas derived from industry like 'quality'(Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, Cannella, 1997, Hauser & Jipson, 1998). These modernist discourses, which are expressed in discursive practices of 'quality' 'educare' environments, 'developmentally appropriate' practice and legal systems like accreditation and risk assessment tools, have always been culturally inappropriate for Indigenous people. We can tell that from uncovering 'hidden histories' (Rose, Read, 1999) and because a lot of the colonial marginalisation and silencing of Aboriginal knowledges happened so recently and according to some Indigenous leaders (Bayles, T., 1989: 5; Nakata, M, 1998: 19) continues to happen today, by also listening to contemporary Aboriginal voices. Questioning and problematising ideas of quality, development and developmentally appropriate practices are now being carried on from inside the early childhood discipline because they apply normative pressure, what Dianne calls a 'one t-shirt fits all' philosophy. This disadvantages everyone because it often means in practice people having to stop believing and acting in ways that are an important part of their cultural identity. People like me miss out on all the richness and diversity of non-dominant cultures and the possibilities for learning perhaps some better ways of thinking, being and getting along in the world. But being stuck in a cultural identity in permanent opposition is like being stuck in a different t-shirt. A recent example of this position is Nigel D' Souza's article in the *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* (1999: 26-33). To rigidly try to make everyone the same or to rigidly insist on difference can be two sides of one coin . One resource in Australian Aboriginal early childhood education which makes space for a variety of discourses is *Talking Early Childhood* (McClay & Willsher, 1999). Another is Indigenous leaders, who like Dianne take from the mainstream what is their right as citizens and who feel comfortable in their Aboriginality. Dianne and I recently travelled to Canada to meet and talk with such leaders.

DIANNE:

One of the main areas I saw when travelling to another country, there were many things that were similar to what was happening in my environment. The things that Teresa Wildcat was doing I felt comfortable and I was at home. There was no need for me to put on airs and graces and I was just somebody who had a similar background. We were both interested in education and she welcomed me by making known to the community that I was her visitor and her friend. It also happens in an Aboriginal community back here, it breaks down a lot of barriers of open communication. The Treaty Four Days pow-wow in Regina where they were celebrating getting their land back was similar to the Aboriginal football that happens every year. Often the only time we get together in a gathering is for funerals, but that was a celebrating time. It's like a big corroboree. Those type of things will never stop: it's like a breaking down of barriers that you're still around, even though the structural connections are lost in the sense we don't have our rules so strong, the boundaries were boundaries of language. Now that is no more but the family structure and kinship patterns are still with us.

Teresa Wildcat was educated in a Catholic residential school and before her retirement was an educator in the Maskwachees (Bear Hill) Cultural College, Hobbema, Alberta. This is part of the Wahkowotin (Good Relations) Schools cluster where her son Brian Wildcat is the cluster Director. We visited a Kindergarten School and the brand new High School, which is led by an Aboriginal Principal. Last time I went all the Land

Bands has their own schools and all their own projects going within that community: we call it Land Councils here. They have been given the opportunity to design a school that they believe is right for them. In each classroom there is a Cree language and culture associate teacher from the community along with the qualified teachers, who are required to invite elders into the classroom on a regular basis. One of the priorities in the strategic plan for the Ermineskin Band schools is to fulfil mainstream educational requirements in 'the Cree Way' (Wildcat, Brian, 2000). In NSW I think there is a need to set up a structure that will be suited to the needs of Aboriginal people. We got 173 early childhood services all over the state. The structural framework has been set up and fed down to the people and they have to get adjusted to that, instead of the other way around.

KERITH:

I think that one-up one-down philosophy is still operating in both countries. We visited four early childhood centres in Canada, the one in Hobbema and three with a cross-cultural focus in Regina. What struck me was that, although there was a Cree language speaking aide in each classroom and a lot of cultural material in the classroom displays, we didn't meet a single Canadian Aboriginal person in charge, not even on the Hobbema reservation. The closest were two sisters at the Early Learning Centre running the Family Literacy sub-program. It's a similar position in Aboriginal preschools in New South Wales, there are very few Aboriginal people successfully completing tertiary qualifications. I agree with Martin Nakata that we live in 'ongoing colonial times', i.e. that the power imbalance continues. But some Indigenous leaders manage to exert positive power in these times (Roberts & Power, 1999a:).
How I would describe Dianne's position in the contact zone of Aboriginal early childhood education is by using a concept described by Teresa de Lauretis as a 'doubled vision'(1987:8). De Lauretis was writing about film theory and feminism when she used this term from Joan Kelly's book (1984: *The Doubled Vision of feminist Theory Women, History and Theory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago). I have adapted this idea to help me think about the power relations of race. I think Dianne and other Indigenous leaders adopt a 'doubled vision' of race, in that there is no conflict for them in choosing to open doors in the mainstream while claiming full membership of a contemporary Aboriginal culture. In de Lauretis' terms ' The terms of a different construction of ...[race] also exist, in the margins of hegemonic discourses. Posed from outside the [colonial] social contract and inscribed in micropolitical practices, these terms can also have a part in the construction of [race] and their effects are rather at the 'local' level of resistances in subjectivity and self-determination' (1987: 19).

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